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ABSTRACT

A study examined whether assigning students to write analytically in response to video texts can lead to students becoming more critical viewers of television. A 30-second television commercial was shown to a freshman composition class with limited visual literacy training and to a class without such media literacy training. Students in both classes wrote for 10 minutes in response to highly directed prompts after viewing the commercial. Results indicated that students who had been exposed to training scored higher on their written responses than students not exposed to the media literacy training. However, pre-tests to establish the comparability of the two groups were not conducted, so results must be regarded as tentative, although end-of-semester tests indicated that students not exposed to the training were better writers than students who were trained. Case study interviews were conducted with nine students who scored high, middle, and low on the written response to the commercial. Results indicated that critical viewing skills may not always be expressed in critical writing about commercials, and that research needs to try to tease apart writing abilities from general competence in television literacy. Findings suggest that teachers should engage students in active, critical questioning of television texts using the analytical approach that English teachers already use to understand print texts. (Appendixes present a model of theories of television reception, the writing prompts, a list of selected features of high and low scores of the written responses, and mean scores.) (RS)

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TALKING BACK TO TV: MEDIA LITERACY AND WRITING

As I was beginning the Masters in Composition program at San Francisco State University a couple of years ago, we focused on the writing classroom as a tenuous community, powerful in the way it could engender students' critical thinking. Yet upon arriving home from these heady dialogues, confronting a frightening torrent of so-called information about the Persian Gulf War from my brand-new color television, it was difficult to comprehend what our dialogues had to do with this larger world. This post-literate world of photo-montage news flashes, Presidential sound bytes and computer game camera work seemed to exist in another dimension from our emphasis on higher-order literacy. And I wondered if writing classes could be a site of critical distance from TV culture.

So with the support of some very encouraging faculty at S.F. State, I began to develop a small, short-term research project. My initial research questions were expansive: can teaching media literacy, assigning students to write analytically in response to video texts, lead students to become more critical viewers of TV?

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But what is critical viewing? Theoretically, I tried to stake out a middle ground between the media determinists who assert that TV is narcoticizing us and postmodern free spirits who say TV means whatever we want it to. I seek a theoretical approach

that both acknowledges the powerful, often fearful, effect TV has had on discourse, while remembering that interpretation and discourse is an incredibly complex social product which cannot be easily determined by TV itself. To move toward an empirical definition of viewing, I relied on Salomon's concept of television literacy (1983; see Appendix A for a diagram of Salomon's model). Critical viewing, at least for college-age students, takes place primarily in the process of what Salomon calls "elaboration," in which the the viewer connects the TV message and story with more general knowledge, expectations and hypotheses. Salomon says that even if TV watching were inherently less demanding than reading a book, this does not make for a limit in the amount of inferences, associations and elaborations we can carry out (1984, p. 650).

Transforming this raw concept--critical viewing-- into an operational definition for research has been a difficult process, particularly since this research has very little precedent, as far as I know. Naturally I undertook an ambitious research project to, among other things, measure the effect of visual literacy curriculum (an old S.F. State assignment analyzing magazine ads) on students' written responses to a 30-second TV advertisement with prompts, followed by interviews with students rated high, middle and low on written responses.

The key hypotheses I'll focus on today was that a freshman composition class that had done limited visual literacy training (assignment to analyze and make inferences about image and text

of a magazine advertisement) would write more critical responses to a TV commercial than a second freshman composition class watching the same commercial without such media literacy training.

A 30-second commercial was shown to these classes three times. This Diet Coke ad is extremely rapid-fire and has almost no informative intent. Rather it invites the viewer to fantasize him/herself as member of a timeless nostalgic utopia set in a glitzy, upscale nightclub with a swing-era big band, led by Elton John. The styles are obviously contemporary, but the inclusion of deceased American pop stars, Humphrey Bogart, James Cagney and Louis Armstrong makes for astonishing technical magic and a surreal time scheme. Diet Coke is portrayed as proper for sophisticated social drinking, but aside from the tough guys, all the Coke drinkers are the beautiful young women. The ad tries to associate Coca-Cola, surely a "universal" icon already, with twentieth century American Hollywood icons, to allow them to reaffirm each other as both popular and classical elements of American culture.

The prompts after the commercial was shown were highly directive (see Appendix B) and the classes had to write for ten minutes in response to the prompts. * Examples of high and low scoring on the written responses are detailed. I settled on scoring variables, which are discrete segments of writing measured on a qualitative basis, whether or not they are answering the prompts.

Despite my efforts to find two classes that differ only in this one respect, and thus isolate the ad essay unit as a discrete "treatment," with a measureable effect, I was not able to conduct pre-tests to more fully establish the comparability of the two groups in writing skills, critical viewing skills and other respects. My findings here have to be regarded as tentative.

However, this analysis yielded data supporting the hypothesis above (see appendix D). The Ad Essay class scores were, on the average, 1.92 points higher than the Non-Ad Essay class. This gap between class averages is just over 1 Standard Deviation of the two classes' scores. *

The noteworthiness of the Ad Essay Class' higher scores is underlined by the difference between the two classes' performances on an independent test of timed writing skills, the holistically-scored timed writing test given to all freshman composition students at the end of the semester. On this test, research subjects in Non-Ad Essay class were judged to have higher writing abilities than students in the Ad Essay class. This difference, along with the higher class ranking of Non-Ad Essay class students leads to the general expectation that Non-Ad Essay class students will be better writers, thus strengthening the evidence that Ad essay class's unit on advertising made the difference in their performance on my commercial response

exercise. This certainly leads me to doubt the hypothesis that the written ad responses are merely tests of a certain type of writing ability and no more.

However, even this limited claim must be regarded tentatively for two reasons. First of all, there is a general problem with considering the writing done on the ten minutes ad response exercise (even after 5 minutes of introduction and viewing) with very directive prompts to be the same as a one hour essay test * . This inconclusive data from the ad responses about the effects of visual literacy curriculum and about the distinction between writing ability and critical viewing skills reemhasized the need for other types of data.

Case study interviews offered a different vantage point from which to define and examine critical viewing. I selected nine students who had scored high, middle and low on the written response to the Diet Coke ad (see the sheet with the Diet Coke prompts to see criteria for these classifications). Generally the low scoring students on the written response had not been able to describe the period or setting's relevance to the commercial's appeal, had missed the significance of the glamourous female models as well as the the deceased male pop stars, and had avoided specific analysis of the ad's strategy, rarely venturing beyond the assertion that the ad aimed to sell the product. The interviews consisted of the students responses to my questions

about a comparable TV commercial and the discussion of a recently televised news story.

Interviews with the low scoring students underscored the notion that critical viewing and writing critically about viewing are not the same things. Although none of them had access to the background knowledge that allowed the high scoring students to immediately conceptualize the Toyota commercial ("using juxtaposition," "post-MTV editing," or "using sex to sell"), they had very different approaches for analyzing the commercial. One student, Kim, elaborated the alternating visuals in greater detail, and defined alternating visuals as an attention-grabber. While she did not conceptualize the alternation and irony as the strategy the ad used to appeal to the pragmatic and impulsive sides of the viewer, she did notice that the alternation appealed to conflicting motives in the viewer. On the other hand, Jenny referred to fewer specific details, and more importantly missed the central significance of the alternating visuals. To Jenny, it was just another ad promising popularity and excitement to the buyer. Here you can see a major difference in approach between two students whose writing scores on the ad response had been quite low.

All three of the low scoring students, unlike the rest of the interviewees, declined to view the ad a second time, suggesting that they had a relatively low awareness of the density of TV texts. However, in my description of the "low" students' interpretations, I don't want to encourage stereotyping. When I

asked them about a recent news story they'd seen on TV. Jenny, who'd shown so little interest in the ad shown, was very critical of the TV coverage of alleged drug use at the home of former Governor Jerry Brown and very skeptical of the story's motive. Kim's objections to the TV story of the disruption of Ronald Reagan's speech in Las Vegas is a perfect example of one viewer's resistance to the "decontextualization" (Postman, 1985) of TV news: "What I didn't like about the story was that it didn't tell us the story at the beginning or end--just showed shots of it. I'm curious about what happened before." These case studies point out that critical viewing skills may not always be expressed in critical writing about ads, and that research needs to try to tease apart writing abilities from general competence in TV literacy.

For our understanding of TV reception to advance, the concept of critical viewing could certainly be improved by case studies with subjects who seem to be more naive and more critical viewers, similar to Flower and Hayes' research with novice and expert writers. Case studies and protocol analyses of actual viewing might bring us closer to defining critical viewing cognitively than any number of written responses. Closely observed home viewing and social group viewing might lead to a better understanding of the social dimensions of TV viewing. From this approach, detailed definitions of critical and naive viewing could evolve largely from observed activity of purported novices and experts, rather than simply from the researcher's assumptions.

This research, if it continues, will also has to become truly interdisciplinary. The broadcasting and advertising industries have generated mountains of viewer research which can help us better understand naive-critical viewing, despite the fact that the purposes industry research might be different than an educational researcher. There is also a growing anthropological branch of media studies, looking at TV use in its "natural" context that is essential. Research on critical viewing must draw upon all the existing research on "normal" TV viewing as a cognitive and a social activity. Only by having a better understanding of normal viewing can we define what more critical viewing might be. Once this definition is clarified, we can do more definitive research about the contribution of writing to critical viewing.

But I don't plan to become a professional researcher, and I'd like to conclude by speaking as a teacher. We already teach TV topics and many composition anthologies include sections on media issues. However proposing television as a text to "read" and write about in class may sound like a recycled McLuhanesque gimmick to keep restless undergraduates entertained. Even worse, it might remind teachers of Whittle Communications' effort to pipe in so-called "news programs" to high school classroom, including commercials. In fact I propose the exact opposite: while Whittle encourages students to get more spoon-fed "knowledge" using the lethargic viewing habits students already have, I propose that we engage students in active, critical questioning of TV texts using

the analytical approach that English teachers already use to understand print texts.

To view TV critically, and certainly to write about it, we cannot allow the flood of images, words and associations to flow by. We have to "catch" one program and "hold it still" (not a big problem with VCRs), reviewing it until its formal structures become apparent. Students may initially believe that TV is easy to analyze. In classes where magazines ads are analyzed, students feel quite comfortable talking about them, but encounter difficulty when they have write about the ads in a more distanced, skeptical way. Some prefer to luxuriate in the fantasy of the ad they picked.

Analyzing TV might engender student resentment, as the teacher tries to steal away one more of life's simple pleasures. It is no small matter that TV is the beating heart of our consumer cornucopia, and that its images promise to satisfy needs and desire that go unsatisfied every day. Remember that TV is viewed within more intimate oral discourse communities, and that students could be understandably defensive about subjecting their private realm to public ridicule and sarcasm. These discussions must start from the common ground of televisual culture that we all share, start, as Paolo Freire and Ira Shor argue (1987: pp. 148-150), from the concreteness of student language and perceptions, and use the students' motivation to inquire into their world to open up a more rigorous, theoretical approach. I'm not sure how to carry on this balancing act, but I'm motivated to try it out,

given my belief that television has become the fundamental frame through which most people construct a sense of reality.

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Appendix A
A CONTINUUM: THEORIES OF TV RECEPTION

Meaning determined by medium
Viewer as passive, drugged

Meaning determined by viewer
Viewer active, subversive

Neil Postman
Jerry Mander
text-centered

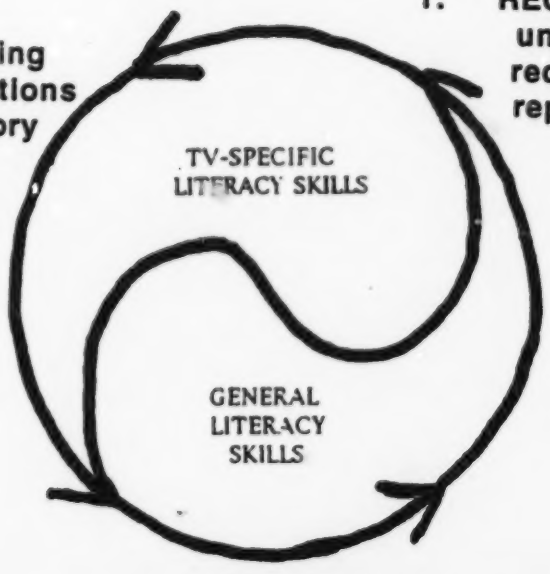
Television Culture
John Fiske

reader-centered

DEFINITION OF TV LITERACY (Salomon, 1983)

1: RECODING: interpreting uniquely televisual signs, recoding into parallel representations

2. CHUNKING: structuring recoded representations in short-term memory to form narratives



3. ELABORATION: applying abstract concepts and world knowledge to TV content: associations inferences, questions

Appendix B Prompts for Written Response to Diet Coke Commercial:

1-What is the general situation portrayed? When and where is it taking place?

2-What does the appearance of pop culture heroes add to the scene?

3-What roles do men and women play in the ad? Who is the target audience?

4-Given our familiarity with Diet Coke, what's the point of the ad?

5-Did you enjoy this commercial? Why or why not?

Appendix C
Selected Features of High and Low Scores on Ad Response Writing

HIGH SCORES	LOW SCORES
1- setting highly specific observes collapsing of past and present	1- setting vague/general No different times time seen as self-evident
2- iconic power of dead heroes; mythic status	2- heroes add excitement, appeal
3- describe sex roles in detail contrast of male heroes and female beauties	3- no gender difference seen differences seen, not important
3- audience defined by sex and generation, related to ad	3- answer unrelated to ad
4- associate energy, beauty, youth, timelessness, youth, timelessness, glamour. Coke as classic along with classic Hollywood	4- purpose to sell the product, unrelated to ad

Appendix D

Mean Ad Response Scores and Mean Timed Writing Scores

of 2 First Year Composition Classes

	Ad Response	Timed Writing Score
No Ad Essay class	3.94 (n=17)	3.25 (n=13)
Ad Essay class	5.86 (n=21)	2.89 (n=18)
both classes average	5.00	
Broadcast Communications class	7.66 (n=44)	

Each ad response score was based on scoring segments 0, 1 or 2, and totalling them. Thus there was no upper limit and occasionally scores went as high as 25 and as low as 3. The ad response scores and the timed writing scores are in no way comparable. The timed writing scores were based on a holistic rating from 1 to 4. They are presented only to provide data related to the alternate hypothesis that the ad response writing was merely a test of writing ability.

Jeff Goldthorpe

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